

## **Grounding in Igbo Grammar: A Cognitive Linguistics Approach**

**Chinenye E. Onuoha**

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

[cokoye@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:cokoye@unizik.edu.ng)

&

**Chinedu Uchechukwuc.**

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.

[uchechukwu@unizik.edu.ng](mailto:uchechukwu@unizik.edu.ng)

### **Abstract**

Grounding is a term used by Radden & Dirven (2007) to refer to the concept of reference. In a bid for speakers of a language to communicate effectively, we try to create the same instance we have in mind in the mind of our co-interlocutors also. This we achieve through ‘grounding’ the information we intend to pass by the means of referring expressions. This work examines the applicability of this concept to Igbo language data. The data is a radio programme recorded on the 9th of November from Bliss FM 91.5 titled “Goomenti etinyego anya n’ihe gbasara ipia umu aka utari n’ulo akwukwo.” The approach adopted is the cognitive linguistics perspective as used by Radden & Dirven (2007). The researcher’s decision to use a natural

language data among speech interlocutors is in a bid to ascertain if these types of references could be seen in real conversation. The data was analyzed with the aim of discovering if the sixteen (16) types of reference identified by Radden & Dirven's (2007) hypothetical English examples can be applicable to Igbo natural language data. This was however achieved despite the difficulty the researcher faced in analyzing the types of reference in Igbo since there is no one to one correspondence between English and the language under study (Igbo). From the analysis, we have been able to identify the sixteen (16) different types of reference in the Igbo language. It was discovered that even though Radden & Dirven (2007) uses hypothetical data in their description of these types of reference, the types are also obtainable in natural language as can be seen in the analysis. This work therefore concludes that reference can be grounded in the Igbo language, not just by using referring expressions such as the determiners, demonstratives adjectives and numerals as the other researchers have pointed out, but also through different expressions as classified in the analysis of this work. However, we recommend that there is need for language scholars, precisely linguists to show more interest in the concept of grounding since it is an important aspect of speech communication.

**Keywords:** Grounding, Reference, Communication, Cognitive Linguistics

## Introduction

Specification of entities is emphasized in the use of language. Different linguistic strategies apply here. Radden & Dirven (2007) refer to this specification as ‘grounding things. At the general level, they comment that speakers try to make things they have in mind accessible to hearers by relating what they say either to an ongoing speech situation or to the hearer’s state of knowledge as accessed by them (speakers). What this means is that speakers anticipate wholesome communication, that is, communication in which there is a speaker-hearer agreement on subject matters.

Another way of describing what Radden & Dirven (2007) calls ‘grounding things’ is referencing, in other words, specification of things in the real world through the use of language is simply specifying references. Hence, we can talk about reference, referents and referring expressions. In referencing, referents are determined by linguistic elements (referring expressions).

This paper concerns itself with the concept of reference and how it is specified in Igbo. There are basically 3 types of references that have been identified: the indefinite reference, the definite reference and the generic reference. Examples of these types of reference have been given especially in English. The extent to which the examples apply to Igbo has not been given much attention. Hence this work focuses on determining

the extent to which these types of references are represented in the Igbo language.

## **Literature Review**

This section describes reference, the understanding of reference from different perspectives and the three types of reference.

According to Radden & Dirven (2007:87), A speaker “grounds” the instance of a thing in an act of reference...When we want to talk about such instances, we need to draw the hearer’s attention to them and ensure that the hearer will have the same instance in mind as we do. What this means is that, as speakers of a language, we cannot assume that our interlocutors understand what we have in mind when we speak; it is important that we ‘ground’ the information we intend to pass on for a better communication.

The particular instance of a thing we draw attention to in speaking is known as a referent, and the communicative act of directing the hearer’s attention to a referent is known as reference. An act of reference is achieved by using a referring expression, by means of which the speaker “anchors”, or grounds, a referent in the current discourse situation.

According to the authors, successful acts of reference are performed so automatically that the complexities of referring are hardly noticed. The example below

illustrates reference by considering instance of referential failure.

Gerald to Harry: “We will meet at the pub in Greek street”. (2007:88)

(Gerald goes to the ‘Coach and Horses’, while Harry is waiting in the ‘Three Greyhounds’). The information given by Gerald was obviously not precise enough for Harry to call up the same pub that Gerald had in mind. Even though the speaker provides the hearer with the name of the category, ‘pub’ so that he would not look for other things like shops, in addition to provide the location ‘in Greek street’ so that the hearer would not go to the pub in Gower Street, the speaker’s use of the definite article ‘the’ expresses his assumption that the pub he had in mind was the only pub in Greek street, and was also accessible to Harry. Meanwhile the use of the definite referring expression also confirms to Harry that the referent he is thinking of is also the one that Gerald meant.

Grounding is achieved by using grounding elements in the referring expression, which anchor the instance in the current discourse and thus make it accessible to the hearer. Reference is a cognitive phenomenon, and the entities invoked by referring expressions are conceptual in nature. This can be seen from the fact that I can say

things like “I have no money”, where the referent ‘no money’ has no existence in the real world.

Referents are always part of larger knowledge structures. (cf. Radden & Dirven 2007:89).

The idea of grounding has been described in this section, specifically from the view of Radden & Dirven (2007).

### **Different Perspectives of analyzing Reference**

The concept of reference has been described in different disciplines to mean different (even though related) things. Here, we shall look briefly at the pragmatic view, the semantic view, the cognitive linguistics / cognitive grammar view.

#### **The Pragmatic Perspective**

The pragmatic view of reference according to Yule (1996), is defined as the way certain information is identified with its real entity based on shared knowledge between speaker and hearer. It refers to an act by a speaker in using linguistic ability to enable listener to identify what the speaker is referring to. He further posits that reference is a social act in which the speaker assumes that the word or phrase chosen to identify an object or person will be interpreted as the speaker intended. (cf. 1996:22).

## **Semantic Perspective**

The concept of reference from the semantic perspective is seen as denotation. Thus Lyons (1995:404) posits that reference deals with the relationship which holds between words and things (their referents). What this means is that words refer to things, rather than signify or name things.

## **Cognitive Linguistics/Grammar Perspective**

Reference in cognitive linguistics/ cognitive grammar is called ‘ground / grounding’. It involves the speaker and hearer, the speech event in which they participate, and their immediate circumstances (that is the time and place of speaking). Grounding is not a grammatical category (like noun, verb, or preposition). It is rather a semantic function, an aspect of conceptual organization by which an expression qualifies as a nominal or a finite clause. (Langacker 2008:78, 272).

This supports Langacker’s earlier claim that the figure within a scene is a substructure perceived as “standing out” from the remainder (the ground). Grounding presupposes instantiation, for it involves the relationship between an instance and the speech-act participants. Grounding predications for nominals divide into two basic sets. Those which focus on degree of definiteness take the ground (G) as their primary reference point. Relative quantifiers also serve as grounding predications

and identify an instance with reference to a more inclusive class. These grounding predications however can be achieved using the indefinite articles, the relative quantifiers and other universal quantifiers. (Langacker 1991:96). Taylor (2002:353) supports the use of determiners and quantifiers thus ‘determiners have the specific function of grounding a noun. Grounding can also be affected by the use of a quantifier’. Evans (2007:98) relates grounding in Cognitive Grammar ‘to any utterance and includes the participants, the time of speaking and the immediate physical context. Subjective construal and objective construal are understood relative to the notion of ground’.

The concept of grounding according to Radden & Dirven (2007:48) refers to the speaker’s ‘anchoring’ of a situation and its participants in the speech situation shared by speaker and hearer. The authors point out that successful communication crucially depends on the speaker’s and hearer’s tacit agreement on the instances of the thing talked about. That is to say, both speaker and hearer must have the same mental space or frame of the reference.

The particular situation described and its participant can be seen as figures and the speech situation as the all-dominating ground. In this perspective, an act of reference is achieved by using a referring expression, by means of which the speaker “anchors”, or grounds a



referent in the current discourse situation. This aspect of grounding is the focus of this work.

## **Types of Reference**

There are basically three (3) types of references as highlighted by Radden & Dirven (2007:91) and they will be briefly summarized here. They include:

The Indefinite reference

The Definite reference

The Generic reference

Each of these types also has its sub-classifications. All the examples in the review are extracted from Radden & Dirven (2007:91-111).

### **Indefinite reference**

Indefinite reference involves singling out a particular element from a reference mass, or a set. Here, the speaker tends to select from a collection of elements that forms a whole. Example:

A Belgian found a monkey

Can you open a window? (pg 91)

In example (2), one particular Belgian is singled out from the set of all Belgians and when we ask someone such question as we have in example (3), we have in

mind that there is a set of windows in the room or the car in which we (the speaker) and the hearer(s) are and we would like to have one of the windows opened, that is one particular window is also singled out from a set of windows. We talk of a set of windows because if the room has only one window, we will not say “Can you open a window?” rather we will say, “Can you open the window?”

Indefinite reference has therefore been described as ‘exclusive’ because of its function of singling out an element for reference from a set while excluding other elements of the set. Here, the speaker understands that the instance he is using in the conversation is not accessible to the hearer, therefore he tries to create a mental space for the instance in the hearer’s mind and he does this through the use of the indefinite article ‘a’. The choice of the indefinite determiner to be used depends on the type of noun (whether singular or plural count noun or mass noun), on the context (whether affirmative or non-affirmative) and on the speaker’s expectation (whether positive or negative).

Indefiniteness is marked by the indefinite article a(n) or the determiner *some*.

There are two subtypes of indefinite reference: the specific reference and the non-specific reference.

(i) Specific reference: We talk of specific reference when the instance the speaker is referring to is in the speaker's mind. Example:

(4) a. I want to marry an American. He lives in Kalamazoo. (pg 94)

b. There is an American who lives in Kalamazoo and who I want to marry.

The American talked about in (4a) & (4b) is a factually existing person in the speakers, though not in the hearer's mind. This illustrates the indefinite specific reference. The speaker uses a specific reference to signal to the hearer of the referent he (the speaker) has in mind and instructs the hearer to create a mental space for that referent. The specific reference is used in introducing a new information that the hearer is not aware of or it can be a referent that the hearer can infer to from the elements of a given cultural frame. The referring expressions play the important role here. They are used to make the reference specific or non-specific.

(ii) Non-specific reference: referents of this type belong to imaginary, or virtual reality. Here, the referents in the mind of the speaker do not have any factual existence or reality. Eg;

(5) I want to marry an American. He should be rich. (pg 94)

Unlike the American talked about in (5) where the referent exists in the speaker's mind, here the American is no specific real person.

Non-specific reference can also be achieved through the use of such non-affirmative constructions as the yes-no questions, negations, imperatives, conditionals, and constructions involving modal verbs or verbs of want, need or desire. Using these constructions, the speaker signals that he does not make any claims about the factual existence of a referent rather he sees it as having a virtual existence.

(6)a. Would you like a cup of tea?

b. No, thank you. I don't fancy tea so early in the morning. (pg 96)

Just like the American in (5) is only a dreamed-of husband, the drink talked about in (6) is only a virtual entity.

### **Definite reference**

Definite reference does not single out a member of a set, rather it includes all elements that form the set. It does not exclude any of them, therefore it is said to be inclusive. Here, the speaker assumes that the hearer has successfully created a mental space for the instance (a prior knowledge) therefore both of them share the same instances. Example:

(7) Can you open the window? (pg 96)

Here, the speaker refers to a window that is the only one of its kind or draws our attention to a given pragmatic situation. Maybe in a room that has only one window, or that has several windows but of which only one can be opened without having to remove piles of paper or plants.

In definite reference, in order for the speaker to include and refer to all the elements in a set, the set has to be mentally shared by both the speaker and the hearer—hence making the referent definite. The referent may be found in the present speech situation, it may be evoked in the current discourse, or it may be part of the social and cultural world shared by speaker and hearer.

There are three subtypes of definite reference: the deictic reference, the discourse reference and the unique reference.

(i) Deictic reference: This is the type of reference that is accessible in the environment of the speech situation and can be pointed to. Here, the speaker tends to reveal the deictic centre of the speech situation. It will be difficult to understand them if the speaker, hearer, place of utterance and time of utterance is unknown. Example:

(8) I thought I told you to take the monkey to the zoo. (pg 96)

The deictic centre in the speech situation of (8) is the speaker, who refers to himself as *I*; the secondary deictic centre is the hearer, who is referred to as *you*. The deictic information is important because in a situation where its vital elements are missing, the message cannot be understood.

ii) Discourse reference: Trask (1999) defines discourse as any connected piece of speech or writing and may be produced by a single speaker or writer, or two or more persons engaging in a conversation or (rarely) in a written exchange.

During discourse, we create mental spaces for new referents using indefinite referents. When a mental space for a referent has been successfully opened in the discourse, it becomes part of the set referents shared by speaker and hearer. The speaker may now refer to them at any time by means of definite reference. This type of reference is dependent on the ongoing discourse and can also be called discourse deixis. The discourse reference is further sub-divided into the anaphoric reference and the cataphoric reference. In anaphoric reference, the speaker refers back to entities introduced in the preceding discourse. Example;

(9) a. A Belgian found a monkey and asked a gendarme what he should do with it.

b. The gendarme told him to take the animal to the zoo. (pg 98)

In the zoo story, the referents “the gendarme”, “him” and “the animal” in (9b) illustrate anaphoric reference: they refer back to the same referents introduced earlier in the discourse. An anaphoric referent is already known, therefore mentioning it the second time carries no new information and they are typically expressed by the third person pronouns. The main function of the third person pronoun is to refer back to an antecedent referent.

The cataphoric reference involves the speaker referring to a referent which is to be introduced as indefinite referents in the following discourse. Example;

(10) “Do you know the joke about the police officer and the driver?”

“No.”

“Well. A police officer pulls a man over for speeding...” (pg 99)

Here, the police officer and the driver are cataphorically referred to as definite referents before they are introduced as indefinite referents in the following discourse.

(iii) Unique reference: This type of reference is referred to as ‘unique’ because they are shared within the socio-

cultural world of knowledge of speaker and hearer. Speaker and hearer of the same speech community share the knowledge of their immediate environment, their culture, and the world at large. There are three subtypes of unique reference: inherent uniqueness, qualified uniqueness and framed uniqueness. The inherent uniqueness can be illustrated using a proper noun, a mass noun or an abstract noun; the qualified uniqueness can be illustrated using noun phrases with possessive nouns; and the framed uniqueness which can be demonstrated using the definite noun phrase.

### **Generic reference**

This type of reference is used in generalizing about a class. A class is a collection of similar individual elements that are understood as forming a type and having a name. Eg: a class of tigers. Here, a category is used within the discourse, and the instance of a given category is equivalent to the whole class.

- (11) a. The tiger has stripes.
- b. Americans are rich.
- c. A tiger has a life-span of about 11 years.  
[indefinite generic]
- d. The tiger hunts by night.  
[definite generic] (pg 107)



The tiger here is a generic referent referring to the class of tigers. Languages use the definite and indefinite determiners for generic reference as seen in the example (11c) & (11d) above. There are subsequently four types of generic reference and they are exemplified below:

(12) a. A tiger hunts by night.  
[indefinite singular generic]

b.) An Italian is fond of children.

(13) a. Tigers hunt by night.  
[indefinite plural generic]

b. Italians are fond of children

(14) a. The tiger hunts by night.  
[definite singular generic]

b.) The Italian is fond of children.

(15) a. The tigers hunt by night.  
[definite plural generic] (pg 107)

b. The Italians are fond of children.

### **Reference and Referencing in Igbo (Data presentation and analysis).**

The data here are from a radio programme in Igbo aired on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2016 in Bliss fm 91.5 on the topic

“Gọọmentị etinyego anya n’ihe gbasara ipịa ụmụ aka ụtari n’ụlọ akwụkwọ.” The researcher’s decision to use a natural language data among speech interlocutors is in a bid to ascertain if these types of references could be seen in real conversation. The programme consists of 6 speakers designated A-F. While speaker A is the anchor of the programme, speakers B-F are the different callers that participated in the conversation. The raw data used for this work is found in the appendix. However, only the clauses or phrases that are used for the analysis will be displayed in section 3.2 accordingly.

### Data Analysis

Here, we shall list the different types of references and possibly find their equivalents from the data.

Types of references:

Indefinite: Ọ wee wèré ọ̀gù wee nyé m...

Pro then take hoe then give-pst  
me

“Then, she gave me a hoe...”

Example (16) by speaker C illustrates the indefinite reference in the use of “ọ̀gù” – “a hoe”. The hoe mentioned by the speaker here is not specific to any particular hoe. It can be any hoe.

Specific: ụtàrì áhù...

Cane that  
“That cane...”

Example (17) by speaker C illustrates the specific reference using “*Ụtari ahụ*” – “that cane” which specifies or points to a particular cane from a set of canes.

Non-specific:      *Ó bughị sọ ùtari ...*  
Pro is-neg only cane  
“It is not only a cane...”

(18) exemplifies the non-specific reference with “*Ó bughị sọ utari*” – “It’s not only a cane”. The cane referred to by the speaker C is no specific cane. The indefinite reference can also exemplify the non-specific reference.

(19)      Definite:      *ùtari nkè ná-áká njọ bú...*  
  
Cane that worse is  
“The flogging that is worse  
is...”

The definite reference is illustrated in (19) “*Ụtari nke na-aka njọ bú...*” – “The cane that is worse is...” Speaker B is pointing to a particular type of cane (which is worse). The sentence also occurs with the English definite determiner “the” which is implied or inherent in the Igbo example.

Deictic: m̄ wēe gbánwēe...

Me then change

“I changed...”

Kémgè ùbòchì áhù...

Since day that

“Since that day...”

m̄a n̄’ùlò, m̄a n̄’ùlò ákwúkwō...

Both at house, both at house  
school

“Both at home and in school...”

Examples (20) to (22) illustrates the three (3) basic types of deictic reference. While the pronoun “M” in (20) by speaker C refers to person, “ùbòchì ahù...” in (21) by speaker C refers to time deixis and “n̄’ùlò, m̄a n̄’ùlò ákwúkwō” in (22) by speaker E refers to place deixis respectively. They illustrate grounding by giving the particular person, time and place involved in a context.

Discourse: Anaphoric and Cataphoric

Anaphoric: N̄wá ḡi m̄ée íhé n̄ā-ádīghí m̄mā,  
tàa yà\_áhúhú.

Child your do what  
not good, eat pro suffer

“If your child  
misbehaves, punish him”

Speaker D in (23) illustrates the first type of discourse reference; the anaphoric reference using the utterance “Nwa gi mee ihe n’adighi mma, taa ya ahuhu.” – “If your child misbehaves, punish him.” The pronoun “ya” in the utterance is referring back to a subject that has already been mentioned to the hearer before, “Nwa gi”.

Cataphoric: Ó búghì nwa m mana é jighi ụtari  
azụ nwatakiri...

It is-neg child me but hold-neg  
cane train child

“It’s not my child but a  
child is not trained with  
cane.”

ihé í kwùrù àmáká...

What pro speak-pst very good  
“What you have said is very  
good...”

The cataphoric reference is exemplified in (24) “O bughi nwa m mana e jighi ụtari azụ nwatakiri...” – “It’s not my child but a child is not trained with cane” and (25) “The I kwuru amaka...” – “What you said is good...”. Here, the speaker refers to a referent that is to be introduced in the following discourse (sentence). In (24), the listeners may not understand the child speaker E is referring to since he has not created that mental space before but

with the following sentence, “The o mere nwata ya na ya bi mepurū m anya mmiri” (appendix speaker E), the speaker understands fully which child is being referred to. In (25), the hearer cannot understand ‘which’ of what he has said speaker A is referring to as being good (probably because he has said a lot of things) but the following sentence, “anyị ga na-apịachalu apịachalu”, clearly points to the referent.

Unique: Ódīmáá ótú gòòmentì...

It is good way government

“It is good the way the government...”

Speaker E by the use of “Gòòmentì” in (26) specifies the unique reference because both the speaker and listeners have a common knowledge of who it refers to by virtue of their common culture and environment.

Inherent: Ó bù Chídì...

pro is Chidi

“It is Chidi...”

“Chidi” in (27) by speaker C exemplifies the inherent unique reference which is usually identified using a proper or mass noun.

Qualified: Nwá gị mée íhé nā-ádīghí māmā,...

Child pro do what is-neg good

“If your child misbehaves...”

    Ndí ọgò gị èméká gị árà Pro in-law you do-very  
your body

“Your in-laws really dealt with you...”

...Nwúnyè yá...Wife pro

“...His wife”

Examples (28) to (30) illustrate the qualified unique reference where the speakers use the properties of the referent to describe it in order to differentiate it from other possible referents. It could be in terms of possession, colour, or position of the referent. However, we were able to discover only the qualification of possession from our data. Thus, “Nwa gị, Ndi ọgọ gị and Nwunye ya” by speakers D, A, C respectively.

Framed: Mgbè ónyé ńkúzí ànyí hùrù ná...

When who teacher us see-pst  
that

“When our teacher saw that...”

The framed unique reference is exemplified in (31) by the use of “onye nkuzi” by speaker C which creates the mental space (frame) of school in the minds of the listeners.

Generic: Úmù ntàkírí nà-emé ísì ikē.

Children small always do head strong “Children are stubborn.”

The last type of reference, the generic reference, is illustrated in (32) “Umu ntakiri na-eme isi ike.” – “children are stubborn”. Here, speaker F generalizes about a class of people in the society, “the children” without exempting any member of the class.

Indefinite singular: ...Wēe zùlité nwátà...  
To grow child “To train a child...”

Speaker B (33) exemplifies the indefinite singular generic reference using “...Wee zulite nwata” – “to train a child”. The singular noun “nwata” – “a child” here is indefinite because apart from the fact that it carries an inherent indefinite marker “a” in English, it also doesn’t refer to a particular child the hearers know.

Indefinite plural: Ókwú ókènyè...

Talk adult “Adult talk...”

(34) illustrates the indefinite plural generic with “□kwu okenye...” because even though ‘adult’ as used by speaker A refers to a class of people who are grown up or matured, it is indefinite because the referring expression does not indicate which of them is referred to in this context.



Definite singular: ...Nwátá ahù...

Child that                      “That child/ the child...”

The definite singular generic is exemplified in (35) “Nwata ahù”- “that child” which speaker B uses to point definitely to a particular child.

Definite plural:      Ndí ọmá ná-égénì...

Pro good that listen                      “Good listeners...”

(37) Ndí ọrà ná-ézè... Pro crowd and king “The public...”

Finally, from examples (36) and (37), speaker A illustrates the definite plural generic as in “Ndi ọma na-egenti” and “Ndi ọra na-eze” referring to a particular group of people that constitutes a class of its own.

## **Findings, Summary and Conclusion**

This work has described the concept of “grounding things” or reference. Section 2 outlines the different views on reference from authors and the different types of reference. Section 3 summarizes a few literatures on reference even though none has taken the same approach as in the analysis of this study. Section 4 presents the data for this work, a recorded Igbo programme in Bliss fm 91.5 on the 9<sup>th</sup> of November titled, “Gọọmentị etinyego anya n’ihe gbasara ipia ụmụ aka ụtari n’ụlọ

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This work therefore concludes that reference can be grounded in the Igbo language, not just by using referring expressions such as the determiners, demonstratives adjectives and numerals as the other researchers have pointed out, but also through different expressions as classified in the analysis of this work. However, we recommend that there is need for language scholars, precisely linguists to show more interest in the concept of grounding since it is an important aspect of speech communication.

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